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PARENTING WHILE IN COLLEGE: Racial Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurity During the Pandemic

Gregory Kienzl, Pei Hu, Ali Caccavella, and Sara Goldrick-Rab
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Identifying the Need

Roughly one-in-five college students provide primary care to at least one child while pursuing a higher education credential.¹ Parenting students show very strong commitments to education and excel at higher rates than other students when placed on a level playing field.² The economic and social returns on their education are particularly strong, accruing across generations.³

Yet parenting students remain an often-overlooked group and continue to receive inadequate support. They experience basic needs insecurity at alarming rates, reducing their odds of completing valuable degrees.⁴ Shortages on food and safe housing disproportionately affect single parents of young children, Asian, Black and Latinx parenting students, and Black fathers working toward their degrees.

Parenting students' success, or suffering, has both immediate and long-lasting impacts on families and our nation's social and economic health. Current programs intended to support parenting students do not reach enough of them.⁵ Many policies hinder their progress toward credentials.⁶ Policymakers and institutional leaders must acknowledge parenting students, reform policies that deter their success, and promote support to meet their basic needs.

This brief reveals four untold lessons affecting parenting students, drawing on a nationwide survey of college students fielded fall 2020 and completed by 32,560 students who are parents. Through students' reporting of their lived experience disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender, and cohabitation status, we found:

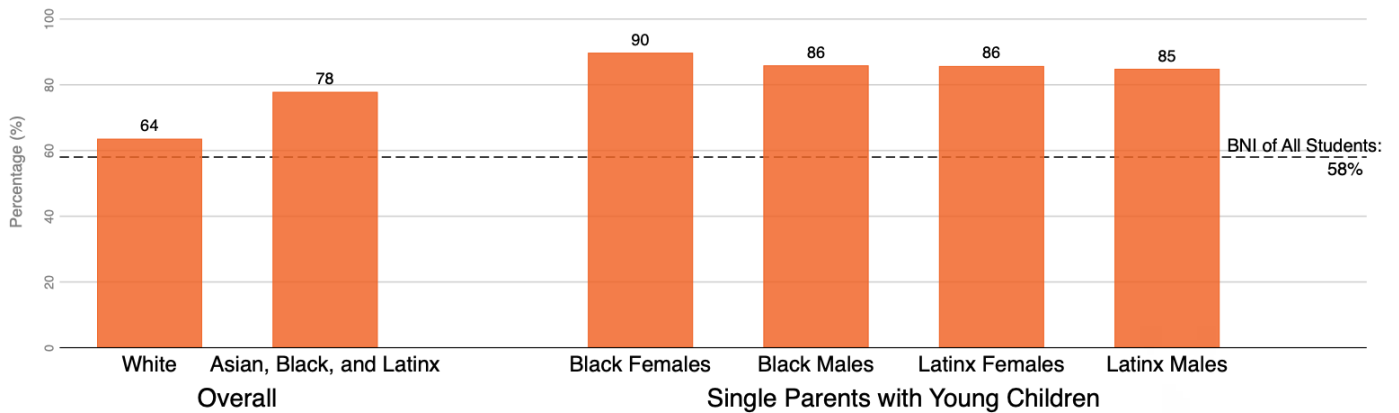
- Asian, Black & Latinx parenting students suffer extremely high rates of basic needs insecurity with deleterious effects on their young children; and
- Nearly all single Black and Latinx students with young children endure basic needs insecurity; and
- Black fathers are struggling significantly, and not getting adequate attention or support.

Actionable recommendations for policymakers and campus leaders to alleviate systemic barriers and better support parenting students follow the brief.

Lessons Learned

Lessons #1: Most parenting students experience food and/or housing insecurity. The percentage of students experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity remained stubbornly at 60% over the past 6 years. The percentage among parenting students is more than 10 points higher.⁷ Among single Black and Latinx parenting students with young children, nearly all (i.e., between 85% and 90%) experience basic needs insecurity (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 | RATES OF BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG PARENTING STUDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND GENDER



Source | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

Note | Basic needs insecurity (BNI) includes students who experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness within the last year. Asian students are those who self-identify as Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Asian American and Other Asian. Black students are those who self-identify as African American or Black. Latinx students are those who self-identify as Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x or Hispanic. Young children refer to children who are less than six years old.



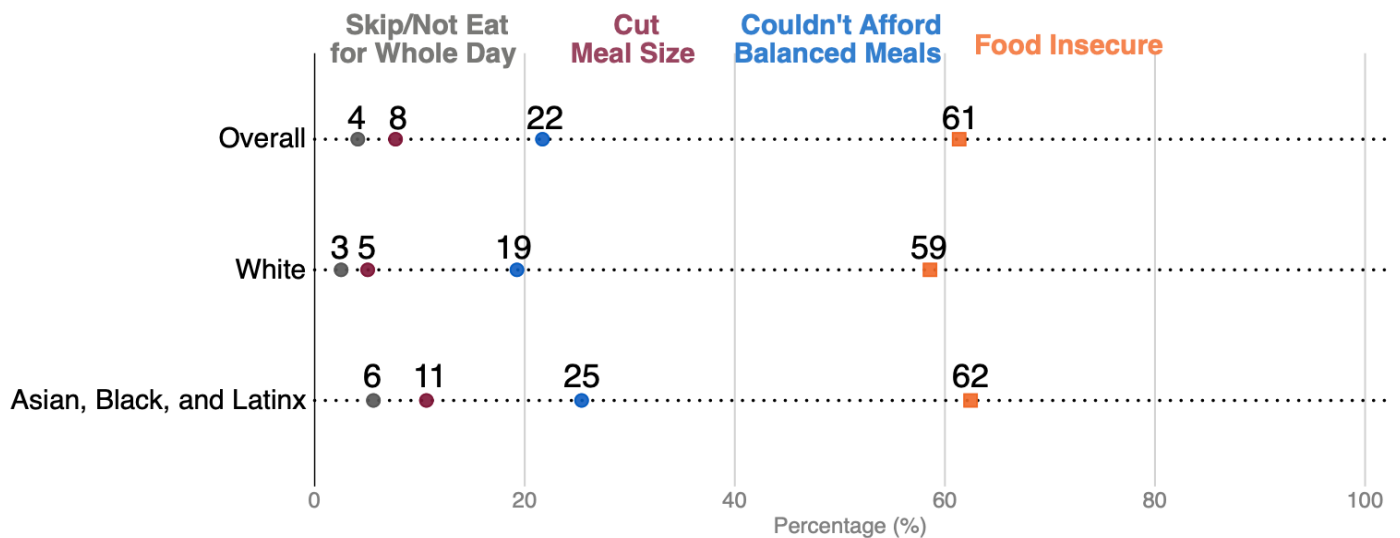
“This is a very stressful time for single parents, especially those that needed to quit their job in order to care for our children at home. When there is not a steady income coming in it causes a lot of stress in the home for the parent that is the main provider for the household.”

- Parenting student female from a two-year college in California

Lesson #2: The ripple effects of basic needs insecurity among parenting students have immediate and often exponential impacts on their children and the family system. The children of parenting students endure astonishing levels of food insecurity. Rates of food insecurity are as high as 60% to 68% for single Asian, Black and Latinx students with young children (not shown).

One-fourth of parenting students of color report that they could not feed their children balanced meals because of a lack of funds. Even worse, roughly 10% of Asian, Black and Latinx parenting students report not having enough money to feed their children, leading them to cut down their family’s meal size, skip meals, or not eat for a whole day (Figure 2). While public assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women Infants Children (WIC) program are designed to ensure that no child goes hungry, systemic barriers prevent parenting students from accessing these much-needed benefits.

FIGURE 2 | RATES OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG PARENTING STUDENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN, BY RACE AND ETHNICITY



Source | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

Note | According to the USDA, students at either low or very low levels of food security in the last 30 days are termed “food insecure.” Asian students are those who self-identify as Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Asian American and Other Asian. Black students are those who self-identify as African American or Black. Latinx students are those who self-identify as Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x or Hispanic. Parents’ food insecurity rates are shown by the squares, and specific types of child food insecurity are shown by the circles. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Lesson #3: The effects of structural racism are evident in patterns of basic needs insecurity. Economic setbacks like job loss, pay cuts, or reduced work hours resulting from the pandemic affect parenting students of color more often than white students, contributing to their economic insecurity. For instance, 36% of all single Black parenting students with young children experienced reductions in their hours or pay during the pandemic (not shown). Two in five Black fathers experienced these income reductions (not shown).

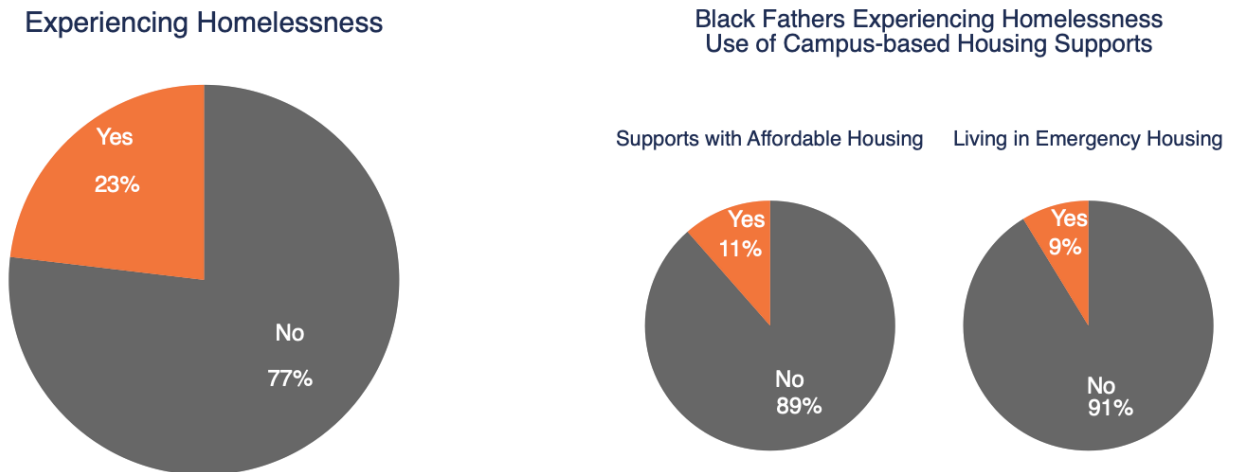


“Especially as a parent to a child with special needs, a single income house... and being a full-time student/ working full-time. It's terrible... This is the lowest I have ever been in my life, I feel like I am getting little-to-no assistance and every assistance program I have applied for takes ages to get approved for—leaving us completely helpless in the meantime.”

Parenting student male from a two-year college in Minnesota

While mothers in college get most of the public attention, Black student fathers struggle quietly to meet the basic needs of their families with limited access to support. As shown in Figure 3, nearly one in four Black fathers experienced homelessness in the last 12 months. This stands in stark contrast to the small percentage of these fathers who report receiving help finding affordable housing (11%) or living in emergency housing (9%).

FIGURE 3 | RATES OF HOMELESSNESS AND USE OF CAMPUS-BASED HOUSING SUPPORTS AMONG BLACK FATHERS



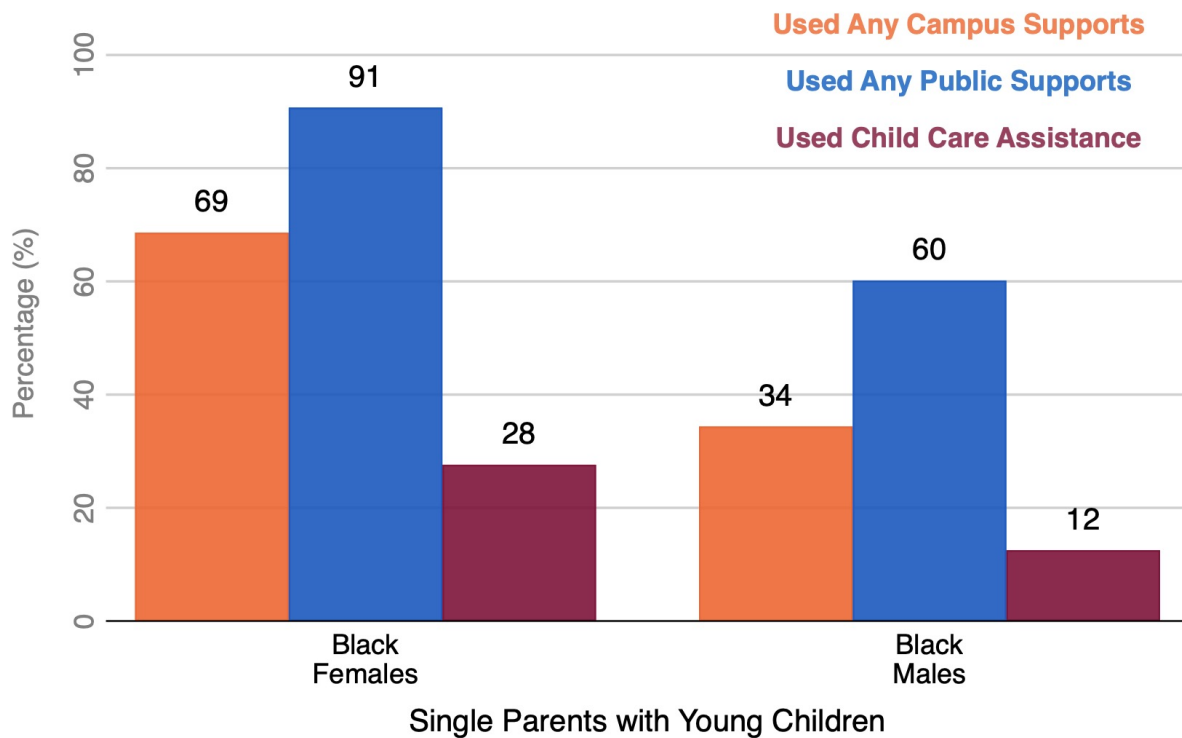
Source | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

Note | Students could have experienced homelessness any time in the last 12 months. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Lesson #4: Higher education leaders must do more to connect parenting students, especially fathers, to basic needs support. Targeting parenting students with information about available campus supports shows promise. This messaging must overcome the prominent gender gap in the rates of campus support utilization among parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity.

The gap is largest between single mothers and single fathers with young children. For example, among parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity with young children, single Black fathers use campus supports at roughly half the rate as single Black mothers, 34% to 69%, respectively (Figure 4). Parenting student fathers with need also appear to lag behind mothers in accessing public benefits like food and child care assistance. The difference in use signals major shortcomings in outreach efforts and stigma surrounding the receipt of such benefits.

FIGURE 4 | USE OF SUPPORTS AMONG SINGLE BLACK STUDENTS WHO PARENT YOUNG CHILDREN AND EXPERIENCE BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY GENDER



Source | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

Note | Categories are not mutually exclusive. Some students may have used multiple types of supports. Young children refer to children who are less than six years old.



“I’m going to school to make a better future for me and my baby, I have lost both of my parents and I can’t rely on anyone else to take care of us, so I’m trying with all of my might, I’m trying to succeed and keep moving forward, I just keep telling myself that there is a rainbow at the end of this storm and to keep pushing no matter what.”

- Parenting student female from a two-year college in Texas

Recommendations

The pandemic heightened the basic needs risks of parenting students. The help available is not reaching those who need it most. Structural racism limits generational wealth for people of color, especially Black people, and entrenches racial barriers to degree completion that make the financial hurdles of college especially risky.⁸ Plus, aid programs often exclude students or disincentivize postsecondary enrollment. Targeted interventions are urgently needed to address the staggering rate of basic needs insecurity parenting students of color and their children experience, particularly among single parents of young children and Black fathers.

Overall, education leaders should collect and report demographic information on parenting students, disaggregated by race and gender. They should also collect information about their basic needs. In addition, policymakers must engage parenting students directly, along with social and health care experts to address the intersectional needs of parenting students. Engaging parenting students’ expertise enables colleges and universities to tailor supportive services and referrals more effectively, as well as provide government agencies data to identify and direct resources to meet their needs.

For Federal Policymakers:

- **Make emergency aid a permanent feature of higher education financing with increased awards for parenting students.** Given that parenting students face widespread basic needs insecurity, especially single parents of color with young children, policymakers should make federal emergency aid permanent and increase funding specifically for parenting students. This would require institutions to target parenting students for outreach and provide them larger amounts of emergency aid to account for child care related costs.⁹ Further, Congress or the Department of Education should require institutions to notify students receiving aid of their potential eligibility for public benefits programs including SNAP and the Child Tax Credit.
- **Treat the pursuit of a postsecondary credential as meeting any compliance, work participation, and/or core requirement for public benefits programs.** Parenting students must juggle coursework with family responsibilities, often while working. Yet federal policymakers have instituted harmful and racialized work requirements in public benefit

These effectively force parenting students to choose between education, parenting, and a job. Policymakers should remove harmful student restrictions and work requirements that limit the ability of parenting students to access public benefits like SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program funds.

- **Expand affordable student housing and remove barriers for parenting students with housing insecurity.** Federal policymakers should expand access and increase funding to address student housing insecurity. Specifically, they should remove restrictions that prevent college students who experience housing insecurity from benefiting from federal financial aid, including Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements and housing benefits like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program. The Department of Education should also work to identify best practices for federal collaboration with colleges to ensure affordable housing is available and targeted to reach parenting students, especially Black fathers who are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to experience homelessness.

For State Policymakers:

- **Overhaul financial aid policies that discriminate against parenting students.** State financial aid requirements often limit the ability of parenting students to receive need-based grants. For example, aid limited to recent high school graduates excludes parenting students who are likely to take time off to care for young children. Programs available only to full-time students exclude parents who balance parenting and work responsibilities by enrolling part-time in college. States should conduct a full-spectrum review of their aid programs and revise them to support rather than hinder parenting students' postsecondary success. This must happen with input from parenting students across racial and gender identities with emphasis on Black fathers who remain overlooked and underserved in state higher education and assistance systems.
- **Prioritize parenting students for receipt of federal child care funding.** Parenting students face child care challenges unique to higher education systems. Public child care supports should both recognize and address those challenges. When leveraging the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) to provide child care assistance to constituents, state policymakers should use their considerable autonomy over copays, subsidy levels, priority populations, contracting procedures, work requirements, and other program elements to elevate parenting students as a priority population.
- **Allow parenting students to apply college coursework as a work requirement for TANF.** While historically racialized work requirements persist for public benefits like TANF, state governments have the authority to designate educational coursework and training as "core activities" and exempt parenting students for up to 12 months. States should elect this option and leverage TANF cash assistance to provide financial support for parenting students seeking credentials for the skilled labor market. They should also consider investing state dollars to support parenting students after the 12-month period ends.

For Colleges and Universities:

- **Help parenting students navigate access to public benefits that can alleviate basic needs insecurity.** Colleges and universities should make efforts to ensure that parenting students know about and get help to receive the full suite of benefits for which they qualify. This is particularly crucial for single parenting students of color who experience disproportionate basic needs insecurity, and Black fathers who largely do not access assistance. Colleges should strive to align peer outreach and programming to students' race, gender, or parenting identities to encourage and model benefits access. Peer-to-peer navigation programs serve to normalize basic needs insecurity and reduce the stigma of using supports. Peer navigators should be compensated for their time as student workers, which will not only bolster their financial stability but also their ability to utilize public benefits.
- **Leverage available state and federal funding to expand access to child care.** College and university leaders should take advantage of state and federal programs intended to support child care for their parenting students. In addition to pursuing Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) subsidies for their parenting students, the federally funded Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program ([CCAMPIS](#)) has demonstrated an increase in parenting students' success.¹⁰ This grant can be used to support or establish campus-based child care programs serving the needs of parenting students' challenging schedules, including daycare and before/aftercare.
- **Identify parenting students, recognize them in campus-wide communications, and build belonging in programs and supports.** Colleges should actively identify and acknowledge their parenting students as core members of the campus community, engage their expertise to build support programs, and promote specific resources available to them. Special attention to reach and engage Black fathers is especially crucial to remedy the dearth of current programs and overcome the impacts of structural racism and stigmatization that are impeding support. Specifically, colleges can:
 - **Increase emergency aid outreach and amounts for parenting students.** Many parenting students did not know emergency aid was available during the pandemic.¹¹ Higher education leaders should use federal emergency aid to conduct targeted outreach to parenting students, make it easy to access, and give them larger sums to meet the additional financial demands of parenting while in college.
 - **Offer programs expressly for parenting students, especially Black fathers.** Ensure parenting students have spaces to express themselves in the school community that accommodate their competing demands. Programs should be developed, and ideally led, by students with similar gender and racial identities. Consider flexibilities in scheduling, offer asynchronous options, provide child care or child-friendly spaces, and limit or eliminate direct and indirect costs for parenting students to engage.

- **Target outreach and impart simple nudging strategies to normalize basic needs insecurity and destigmatize supports.** Leverage basic email or text outreach shown to increase students' uptake of available supports and counter common stigmas surrounding asking for assistance.¹² Depending on the campus population, student needs, and disparities in support utilization, the nudging protocol can be tailored to specifically reach parenting students or to advance a specific type of resource or basic need support.

Parenting students represent the promise of American higher education, yet the majority are struggling to meet their basic needs while enrolled in college. Asian, Black and Latinx parents of young children are enduring some of the highest rates of food and housing insecurity among college students, and Black fathers are being overlooked in support efforts. At this historic time for our nation's recovery, parenting students—especially those historically marginalized by race and gender—must be recognized, centered, and supported for higher education success.

Acknowledgments

The Hope Center is committed to engaging policy and systems leaders to dismantle entrenched racial inequities and invest in strategic initiatives that center students as humans first.

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Research and editing: Vanessa Coca

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